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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a significant difference existed in the pretest/posttest self-reported academic and social-transitional anxieties of first-year community college students (n=356) at the start and at the end of their first semester of college enrollment. The study was conducted in the absence of a formal orientation program. Measures of academic and social-transitional anxieties were recorded and analyzed for a sample of entering first-year students. Further analysis was conducted of the respondents self-reported anxieties in subgroups by race, by sex, and by race and sex. Increases in self-reported academic and social/transitional anxiety were recorded among all subjects and in all subgroups except for a decline in academic anxiety among white males. Significant increases in self-reported academic anxiety were recorded in the black participants subgroup and in the black males subgroup. Two significant increases in social/transitional anxiety were found in all subjects. Participants were classified as neither anxious nor assured. The results of this investigation affirm the consensus of the literature relative to collegiate adjustment. While the first-year community college students surveyed in this investigation demonstrated neither excess anxiety nor assurance, their academic and social/transitional concerns did increase over the course of their first semester of enrollment. The 10-item instrument developed for the study and 2 tables are included. (JBJ)

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ED 394 106

# THE EFFECT OF A SEMESTER OF EXPERIENCE ON THE SELF-REPORTED ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL-TRANSITIONAL ANXIETIES OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Are the collegiate anxieties of entering first-year community college students increased or decreased as a result of a semester of enrollment? Is apprehension upon entering college replaced with assurance at the conclusion of the first term or does initial confidence give way to concern over the course of the first semester of community college experience?

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a significant difference existed in the pretest/posttest self-reported academic and social-transitional anxieties of first-year community college students at the start and at the end of their first semester of college enrollment. Measures of academic and social-transitional anxieties were recorded and analyzed for a sample of entering first-year students. Further analysis was conducted of the respondents self-reported anxieties in subgroups by race, by sex, and by race and sex.

Studies germane to college adjustment concerns with emphasis on either increasing or decreasing levels of academic or social and psychological adjustment are not plentiful. Baker and Siryk (1984) state that "Surprisingly, especially in view of the considerable interest over many years in college student attrition, relatively little attention has been paid to the systematic measurement of adjustment to college" (p. 179). Given limited research in the area of student adjustment to college, investigations which focus on acclimation to the community college experience are minimal. Willner (1980) conducted a survey of 1,610 entering community

college students in which it was determined that high school grade point average, high school curriculum, reasons for going to college, certainty of occupational objective, and parental attitudes toward college were significantly related to intent to persist. While this investigation focused on community college matriculants, it did not address increasing or decreasing adjustment to college but rather focused on student retention.

Apart from general adjustment evaluations such as the Freshman Adjustment Scale developed by Brazziel (1982), adjustment studies focusing on first-year college students are generally concerned with either the evaluation of the effectiveness of an orientation program as in a study conducted by Schwitzer, McGovern, and Robbins (1991) or with the tendency of the participants to persist in their scholastic pursuits as evaluated by Terenzini and Pascarella (1977). This study adheres to the general trend of collegiate adjustment investigations with emphasis on the academic and social concerns expressed by first-year colleges students as identified by Baker and Siryk (1984). In contrast to the majority of investigations of first-year students this study is of community college matriculants as opposed to entering freshmen at four-year institutions, it employs self-reported data, and it centers exclusively on the expressed concerns of the subjects as opposed to being an evaluation of an orientation program or an analysis of intent to persist in college.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at a public community college in the Mississippi Delta. The sample for this investigation consisted of 356 entering first-year community college students intent upon transfer to four-year institutions. Vocational-technical students not intent upon academic transfer were not included in this investigation. Although most respondents in this study attended an orientation session designed principally to explain school rules and procedures this "administrative orientation" was not considered a factor relative to the abatement of the academic or social/ transitional concerns of the entering first-year students as measured in this investigation.

Of the 356 subjects, 299 were traditional students, defined as those ranging in age between 18-20. Although some of the students participating in this investigation had experienced interruptions in their formal educations, only 58 of the 356 participants were over 20 years of age and only 25 of that 58 exceeded 25 years of age. In the sample, 95 of the participants were white males and 52 were black males. White females numbered 103 and black females numbered 104 in the sample group. Two of the females were Oriental.

American College Test (ACT) scores for the subjects ranged from a high of 29 to a low of 11 with a Mean score of 17. The standard deviation among American College Test (ACT) scores for the participants was 2.76.

Eighty-three percent of the participants reported that they had not been exposed to college work prior to the fall semester in which the survey was administered while 59 respondents, 17% of the sample, reported having taken courses on a college or university campus before the start of the fall semester in which the survey was administered. Finally, 322 of the 356 subjects described themselves as full-time students while 25 respondents, 7% of the sample, classified themselves as part-time students.

## Instrumentation

A pretest/posttest format was employed using the Likert-scored questionnaire which appears below. This survey instrument was submitted to entering first-year students in the first week of the Fall term and at the end of the same semester in the next to last week of classes preceding the administration of first semester examinations. The next to last week of classes preceding the administration of semester examinations was selected in an effort to reduce the possibility that a natural tendency toward heightened anxiety might be in evidence on the eve of final examinations.

Five of the questions contained in the questionnaire, numbers 1, 4, 5, 6, and 10, dealt with academic concerns. The remaining five questions, numbers 2, 3, 7, 8, and 9, were directed at social-transitional concerns of the participants.

Given a choice of responses from 1-5 on each questionnaire item with a reply of 5 being indicative of the highest level of

Please rate the extent to which you agree with these statements about yourself by using the following scale:

| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Definitely Yes | Yes | Maybe | No | Definitely No |

| | | Rating |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | I am anxious that I will have difficulty with college math. | (1) _____ |
| 2. | I am anxious about finding the money to pay for college. | (2) _____ |
| 3. | I am anxious that I will find some college professors to be difficult and demanding. | (3) _____ |
| 4. | I am anxious about the grades I will make in college. | (4) _____ |
| 5. | I am anxious that I may have trouble in the required English composition courses. | (5) _____ |
| 6. | I am anxious that I will find the required Social Studies classes (History, Government, Western Civilization, Sociology, etc.) to be very difficult. | (6) _____ |
| 7. | I am anxious about being "on my own" and away from home. | (7) _____ |
| 8. | I am anxious that my college class work may suffer because of other activities and responsibilities which I have. | (8) _____ |
| 9. | I am anxious that I will not "fit in" or be accepted socially by my fellow students. | (9) _____ |
| 10. | I am anxious that I will have difficulty with college science courses. | (10) _____ |

concern or anxiety and a response of 1 denoting the least concern, a range of scores from a high of 25 (concern at the 5 level on each of 5 items) to a low of 5 (concern at the 1 level on each of 5 items) was possible on the five academic anxiety questions as well as on the five social-transitional inquiries. The median point on both scales with a high of 25 and a low of 5 was 15.

Using a two-tailed t-test of non-independent samples to measure significance, the academic and social-transitional anxieties expressed by the respondents in the first week of the fall term were compared with the anxieties expressed by the same subjects in the posttest administration of the questionnaire during the next-to-last week of the same fall semester.

## RESULTS

Increases in self-reported academic and social/ transitional anxiety were recorded among all subjects and in all subgroups except for a decline (-.01) in academic anxiety among white males. Significant increases ($p < .05$) in self-reported academic anxiety were recorded in the black participants subgroup ($n = 156$) and in the black males subgroup ($n = 52$). Two significant increases ($p < .05$) in social/transitional anxiety were found. These increases were found in all subjects ($N = 356$) and in the white student subgroup ($n = 198$). With mean scores in the proximity of the median and in the absence of comparative data, the participants were classified as neither anxious nor assured.

Academic Anxiety

| | N | Median Score | Means Pre/Post | Difference in Means | t-Value | .05 Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All | 356 | 15 | 15.27/15.58 | .31 | 1.91 | NO |
| Males | 147 | 15 | 14.82/15.18 | .36 | 1.47 | NO |
| Females | 209 | 15 | 15.59/15.87 | .28 | 1.28 | NO |
| Black | 156 | 15 | 15.27/15.82 | .55 | 2.21 | YES |
| White | 198 | 15 | 15.23/15.34 | .11 | .52 | NO |
| White Males | 95 | 15 | 15.05/15.04 | -.01 | -.03 | NO |
| White Females | 103 | 15 | 15.40/15.62 | .22 | .78 | NO |
| Black Males | 52 | 15 | 14.38/15.42 | 1.04 | 2.81 | YES |
| Black Females | 104 | 15 | 15.71/16.02 | .31 | .90 | NO |

Social/Transitional Anxiety

| | N | Median Score | Means Pre/Post | Difference in Means | t-Value | .05 Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All | 356 | 15 | 12.82/13.19 | .37 | 2.27 | YES |
| Males | 147 | 15 | 13.03/13.50 | .47 | 1.89 | NO |
| Females | 209 | 15 | 12.67/13.02 | .35 | 1.58 | NO |
| Black | 156 | 15 | 12.58/12.90 | .33 | 1.19 | NO |
| White | 198 | 15 | 12.96/13.38 | .42 | 2.12 | YES |
| White Males | 95 | 15 | 13.36/13.65 | .29 | 1.05 | NO |
| White Females | 103 | 15 | 12.60/13.14 | .53 | 1.93 | NO |
| Black Males | 52 | 15 | 12.44/13.04 | .60 | 1.32 | NO |
| Black Females | 104 | 15 | 12.64/12.84 | .19 | .55 | NO |

## Discussion of Results

This study was conducted in the absence of a formal orientation program designed to abate the academic and social/transitional anxieties of the in-coming first-year students. No treatment was applied in this investigation save the experience of the students in their first semester of community college enrollment. With the experience of the subjects in their first term of community college enrollment serving as an intervening variable, increases in anxiety were recorded in 17 of the 18 measured groupings. Significant increases in academic anxiety were recorded in 2 of the 9 groupings. These significant increases were among black students and by black males. Significant increases in social-transitional anxiety were also found in 2 of the 9 groupings. These increases were found in all subjects and among the black participants.

The pattern of increased anxiety among community college matriculants exhibited in this study are in agreement with the findings of Schwitzer, McGovern, and Robbins (1991) in their identification of a tendency toward declining adjustment among first-year college students. The Zucker and Logan (1990) designation of a "honeymoon phase" in freshmen matriculation might also be applicable to this investigation of first-year community college students. It may be, as evidenced by Zuker and Logan (1990), that freshmen experience a euphoria associated with college

entry followed by a period of dissolution in the discovery that college academic and social transitions require new coping skills.

Two cautions should be exercised in the extrapolation of the results of this investigation. First, this study was conducted at a rural community college with a minority enrollment in excess of 45 percent. The rural characteristics of the community college which hosted this investigation, coupled with an institutional tendency to attract first-generation college students and the proportional number of minority subjects involved in this investigation must be considered in the inferences drawn from the results of this inquiry. A second caution is that a conclusion of this study was that the participants could be classified as neither anxious nor assured based on mean scores which approximated the median. This conclusion was drawn in the absence of a larger perspective. The fact that a mean score is in the proximity of the median within the range of a locally developed test does not preclude the possibility of local scores being either higher or lower than mean scores of a test instrument which has undergone a norming process or one which is evaluated in light of a national or regional perspective.

These limitations aside, the results of this investigation affirm the consensus of the literature relative to collegiate adjustment. While the first-year community college students surveyed in this investigation demonstrated neither excess anxiety nor assurance, their academic and social/transitional concerns did increase over the course of their first semester of enrollment.

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